Laughter, Humor, and the (Un)making of Gender: Historical and Cultural Perspective,

ed. by Anna Foka and Jonas Liliequist
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This recent volume, edited by Anna Foka and Jonas Liliequist, confirms that gender is still, as Joan W. Scott pointed out in 1986, 'a useful category of historical analysis'. Even though the two editors have not imposed a rigid methodological and theoretical approach, the book distinguish itself for its cohesiveness and uniformity.

Despite the different approaches, Michail M. Bachtin and Judith Butler constitute a common benchmark for the authors. Bachtin's speculations on the role of laughter and 'carnivalesque' style in reinforcing social bonds through the temporary subversion of established values, underlies the whole book. Laughter and jokes both questioned and confirmed the social order. The editors and authors of the book, however, are more concerned with the subversive implications of the comic discourse. The latter could indeed be a valve of relief for social and ideological tensions otherwise not expressible, as well as a space of safety in which more transgressive positions could have their say.

Jokes and laughter are treated as social constructs, but they are also invested by authors with an active performative power. This cultural performativity is the common ground between social theories of laughter and gender studies. In this respect, Judith Butler's reflections on the performativity of gender, (that is, the capacity of the social-constructed attributes of femininity and masculinity to shape the self-perception of individuals), underpin the whole volume, notwithstanding the wide range of different approaches displayed by the authors.

The main aim of the book is to analyze how laughter and jokes contributed to reinforce and/or question gender roles and stereotypes. Sociology, literary criticism, philology, visual culture, to mention but a few, are examples of the variety of disciplinary approaches that inform this collection of essays.

The book is dived in two parts. The first focuses on laughter, humour and misogyny, the second on the rhetoric of manhood. The reciprocal and specular construction of masculinity and femininity is a constant theme in both sections.

In the first chapter, *Laughing at Ourselves: Gendered Humor in Classical Greece*, David Konstan (New York University) questioned the well-established stereotype of ancient

Greek and Roman misogyny. Even though this paradigm is grounded in an undeniable anti-feminist streak, what Konstan wants to suggest is that through the depiction of negative female characters, what was ridiculed was actually men's ingenuous expectations towards female virtues. Credulity rather than women's unruliness was the object of men's laughter. This perspective also leaves room for the supposition that the (masculine) ideal of female submission was probably far from being always achieved.

Analyzing Medieval Comic Utopias, Martha Bayless (University of Oregon) wonders whether there could be a Paradise for women as well. In these worlds turned upside down, there was neither tragedy nor threat of divine condemnation. In these fictive narratives, women were representative of the most genuine human appetites. Following their drives, they were more successful than men in realizing their plans. Even though these attitudes remained condemned, what Bayless suggests, is not to take too seriously the explicit stance of these tales, instead, she argues, we should read them as a covert resistance to the dominant religious moral paradigms.

The successive contribution by Lisa Perfetti (Whitman College) continues the focus on the late Medieval world. Here the analysis of comic and humorous texts, ranging from Marbod of Rennes to Chaucer and William Dunbar, aims to read the phenomenon of female labour from a new perspective. Perfetti suggests that, before the rise of the market economy, there were fewer distinctions between male and female occupations. Women could work in the fields, while sometimes men's activities could be carried out from home. Nevertheless, that does not mean that work was not gendered. Female chores were 'low profit' and 'low status', while male occupations were highly valued. In comic literature, women were often depicted as escaping their domestic duties, frequently to commit adultery. Furthermore, in the latter Middle Ages, "several farce dramas" portrayed women disdaining housework and claiming "themselves men's intellectual equals" (52). In late Medieval French literature, women were represented as criticizing men's incompetence and laziness, simultaneously asking for the acknowledgment of their work, also through comic exchanges of roles between husbands and wives.

Anna Foka's (Umeå University) chapter focuses on the Byzantine comic mime. Notwithstanding the paucity of direct sources – mimes had no script – Foka points out the entangled relations between humour, social criticism and transgressive gendered behaviour that characterized this genre. Performers (of both sexes) were almost always slaves or freedmen and freedwomen. Though criticized by Christian polemicist for their explicit sexual content, mimes had been defended by the pagan author Choricius, who wrote his *Apologia Mimorum* in the fifth-century Gaza. This anti-Christian writing focused on the disciplinary effect of societal shaming as a result of laughter. However, Foka suggests that the polemic intent of Christian authors grasped the subversive potential of mimes, more than their supporters did. Against the

backdrop of a patriarchal society, mime constituted a space in which experiments with gender transgressions were allowable.

Kristine Steenbergh's (VU University, Amsterdam) contribution also focuses on theatre, analyzing Ben Jonson's 1626 piece performed in the famous Blackfriars theatre in London (*The Staple of News*). As we know, women were not allowed to perform on stage. But although their presence in commercial playhouses was not encouraged, it seems that they were a consistent part of the audience. Jonson put on stage a metatheatrical joke: four female spectators suddenly burst into the scene, and started to discuss the value of the play. Their names relegated them to the stereotype of women gossipers (Gossip Myrth, Gossip Tattle, Gossip Expectation, Gossip Censure). Nevertheless, Steenbergh suggests that a closer analysis of their remarks reveals a competence and a critical acumen that at the time could be expected of a gathering of qualified male observers.

The section on laughter, humour and misogyny closes with Didem Havlioğlu (Sehir University) chapter on Islamicate Ottoman aesthetics. Havlioğlu starts with a synthetic analysis of the role of humour in the Islamicate world, which underlines how laughter has always been accepted as a genuine expression of positive feeling in Islamic traditions – except when it was directed to question honour and respectability. Refined humour was a crucial aspect of the self-fashioning of literate men, a fact that was often reflected in the Ottoman biographies of poets. Havlioğlu focuses on the unique figure of the female poet Mihri Hatun. Whilst humour usually reinforced the sense of belonging within literary (male) élites, Mihiri used jokes in a transgressive and destabilizing way. Given her alleged beauty, male observers were surprised by her not being married. Mihiri reportedly used her biting humor in order to keep her suitors away. Ridiculing those who praised her outward appearance, she reversed the contemporary gender stereotypes by forcing suitors to recognise her intellectual qualities.

The section on the rhetoric of manhood starts with Anu Korhonen's (University of Helsinki) essay on early modern English jestbooks. Since in England humour was considered a fundamental trait of a refined personality, at that time the consumption of printed collections of jokes was widespread. As already stated by Konstan, with reference to the ancient Greek and Roman world, Korhonen argues that the target of the negative representation of female characters was primarily the patriarchal power, i.e. men. If a wife's reputation was crucial to a man's social prestige, the recurrent theme of the cuckold husband testified to male anxieties about their position. Despite the stigmatization of violence within marriage, wife-beating was socially accepted when it didn't exceed what was considered a 'reasonable' limit. Although the comic world of jestbooks often portrayed beaten husbands, these jokes were frequently used in order to justify men's disciplinary reaction. Jestbooks could then be interpreted as patriarchal rulebooks for masculine authority. Besides these considerations, the chapter provides further interesting inputs for the social history of family. Despite the well-established

opinion that in the early modern period the home and the conjugal bed were not the realm of private affects, this comic literature seems indeed to recognize the value of home intimacy – though questioning it through humour and laughter.

Olle Ferm (Stockholm University) focuses on the comic figure of the horny priest, analyzing a French medieval fabliau (thirteenth century) and a fifteenth-century German *Märe*. The sexual 'tithe' due to the priest was a metaphor of a concrete unbalance in the social hierarchies: whilst women were subjected to male authorities, parishioners were subjected to priests. Ferm analyses how the use of humoristic discourse might shift in relation to the social rank which the audience of the texts belonged to. While in the fabliaux, probably addressed to an aristocratic and bourgeois public, the rich made fun of the underprivileged, in the German *Märe* we see how jokes could have worked as compensations for the social frustrations of a lower status reader.

Visual culture is the central point of Alexander G. Mitchell's (Institute of Archeology, Oxford) chapter on Ancient Greek. Starting from the assumption that gender roles are always learned through the implicit experience of existing in a world of things, Mitchell analyses four comic female types portrayed in vase paintings: the adulterous, the drinking woman, the lazy housekeeper and the gossiper. Although these stereotypes were clearly an embodiment of male anxieties, Mitchell explores how these representations might have impacted a female audience. Her perceptive reading takes into account differences of status and social respectability, considering whether envy might have worked in both directions of the social ladder. Aristocratic ladies might have been envious of the freedom of movement of slave women, even though that same freedom made them an object of ridicule in the (moralistic) humorous representations of vase painters.

Xiaolin (The Forest of Laughter) is a joke book written by the famous Chinese calligrapher and Scholar Handan Chun (132?-225? CE), Shishuo xinyu (A New Account of Tales of the World) was compiled by prince Liu Yiqing (420-479 CE) and Xiaolin guangij (A wide record of Forest Jokes) is a collection of Jokes from the Ming and Ching dynasties (16th-17th century), written by Youxi zhu ren (The Master of Game). These three texts have been analyzed by Mario Liong (Centennial College, Hong Kong) in his article on masculinities in pre-modern China. Despite the differences of styles, and the different audiences they targeted, they all reflect Confucian ideals of masculinity, following which a man was at first supposed to cultivate intellectual and moral qualities. Being able to master oneself was considered an indispensable premise for exercising authority, firstly within the family, and finally within the public sphere. The 'literati' used their alleged moral superiority as a way to justify their hegemonic status in Chinese society. In this context, fatherhood played a crucial symbolic role in the construction of masculinity, as is demonstrated by jokes that ridiculed men without sons, as well as by stories that depicted men who were not able to master their heirs, or to pass on their knowledge to them.

Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir's (Institute for Icelandic Studies, Reykjavic) chapter focuses on the characterisation of male heroes in Old Norse-Icelandic sagas and poetry. Brave men in these stories were expected to die with a chilling laugh on their face and no regard for their own life. Enemies were treated with equal scorn, and men were often portrayed as deriding their dying victims. Verbal insults and physical violence reinforced the performance of Norse masculinity. Friðriksdóttir reveals how some medieval authors problematized these ideals, by presenting them as impossible or undesirable to reach. On the other hand, feminine stereotypes changed after Iceland became a part of the Norwegian monarchy in 1262-1264. A new interest in romance literature, as well as relevant social changes (above all the growing importance of primogeniture and the related anxieties aroused by adultery) increased women's relevance in Norse literature. While female characters were previously only occasionally represented as objects of laughter or derision, after this shift they became common targets of humour and satire. At the same time, the figure of the maiden-king, or later, the warrior-queen, demonstrates how literature provides an artificial space "in which gender as a fixed category is undermined" (222).

Jonas Liliequist (Umeå University) analyzes how 'unmanliness' was used for conflicting political purposes in early modern Sweden. While the old aristocracy insisted on *magnanimitas*, the new nobility pointed out a new interpretation of 'virtue' as steadfastness and self-abnegation in public service, as opposed to ancestry and inherited wealth. However, whatever the reference system, positive attitudes were always identified with masculinity and negative ones with effeminacy. The 'spark' (an elegantly-dressed conceited man) was the ironic figure that embodied the counter-type of manliness in humouristic literature. Influenced by South European fashion, the spark depicted as unmanly and prone to women's wills, even though he has never been portrayed as a male-seducer and a sodomite. Liliequist concludes that, though in a contest shaped by class-conflicts, manliness and unmanliness were "horizontal cultural and social categories" (245). Not even the King, Gustav III, was exempted from social scorn when the threat of impotence and unmanliness questioned his belonging to the male gender.

As already stated above, this book reveals how different methodological approaches can be productively merged when a substantial idea enlivens an editorial project. The value of this volume goes far beyond the limits of scholarship. It is a noted fact that in the past few years, conservative political movements have attacked gender studies by constricting their complexities under the illusory label of a singular 'gender theory', and depicting them as a monolithic ideology. Publications like Foka and Liliequist's book instead show how a flexible and useful theoretical tool gender still is, and how it can contribute to increase and complicate our understandings of past and present societies.